DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 172 856 JC 790 389

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TITLE An Empirical Study Toward a More Meaningful Philosophy Curriculum.
PUB DATE [79]
NOTE 15p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Curriculum; Community Colleges; *Core Courses; *Curriculum Design; Curriculum Planning; Evaluation Methods; *Junior Colleges; *Philosophy; Preservice Education; Student Attitudes; Teacher Attitudes

ABSTRACT

As part of an effort to determine which basic philosophy courses are appropriate to a community college curriculum, 37 topics were itemized by clustering related philosophical concepts under a general concept or topic. Topics were in turn grouped under the following headings: knowledge, major schools of philosophy, logic, value theory and ethics, and applications of philosophical methods. Then, philosophy faculty members and college students and graduates were asked to evaluate each topic in terms of its importance. Agreement about the importance of a topic would be interpreted to mean that the topic is essential to a philosophy curriculum. Knowledge and value theory and ethics received higher than average ratings by all groups. In the schools of philosophy, Plato and existentialism received high ratings, along with logic and inductive reasoning. In the area of applied philosophy, the philosophies of religion, law, and business were rated higher than average. University and community college professors judged more topics important than the student groups. Community college students did not accord high ratings to as many topics as university students. Both faculty and students felt that those teaching philosophy could have primary expertise in another subject but must have some graduate training in philosophy. (DR)

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AN EMPIRICAL STUDY TOWARD A MORE MEANINGFUL PHILOSOPHY CURRICULUM

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With the advent of the community college, those teaching philosophy have encountered a different orientation toward courses at the traditional liberal arts college. A typical community college is comprehensive in its offerings. It has transfer courses that parallel offerings of a four-year college, but it tends to emphasize vocational programs and community service projects. Its diversified offerings have produced a supermarket effect, whereby courses in any of the three areas--transfer, vocational, and continuing education--are justified on the basis of student demand and appropriateness to the institution. The latter criterion is nebulous, to be sure, but in the case of philosophy, what it means is that no upper division courses are permitted.

The supermarket look of a community college transforms philosophy into a commodity among others. In such an atmosphere, not only is philosophy not required, it is clumped together with whatever other curricula are taken to fulfill a "humanities" requirement. Under the community college's rubric "humanities" may fall languages, political science, humanities (as a separate interdisciplinary subject), even sociology and psychology. Apparently, any of these subject matters can do the job equally well of educating the thoughtful person.

Though the educational philosophy of the comprehensive community college does not imply commitment to the traditional

liberal arts model, there is some sympathy to preserve a format of general education. The goals of general education are described by Waller to include "the acquisition of a basic knowledge of the surrounding world and the exposure to a process of self-discovery."[1] Requiring a student to take a sequence of courses that will lead to "self-discovery" fits into the practical-minded administrator's belief about the value of education. The problem with advertising the humanities in this manner is that it promises the realization of a goal which is probably beyond the capability of any curriculum to fully achieve, viz., "self-discovery." Further, making the promise misses the point of the liberal arts in offering experiences to attain an intellectual perspective on life and the world.

The community college is not alone in questioning the traditional liberal arts model. Researchers Cohen and Brawer report that "a major shift is...indicated in contemporary American higher education away from the humanities and toward technical and health programs."[2] Universities, which had shunned offering vocational programs, now are implementing them. Obviously interested in attracting students, university educators may be yielding to the complaints of students about the level of difficulty

1. Robert A. Waller, "General Education: A Challenge for Community Colleges," Community College Frontiers, vol. 5, no. 4, Summer, 1977, p. 47.

2. Arthur M. Cohen and Florence B. Brawer, The Humanities in Two-Year Colleges: A Review of the Literature. To have been published by the ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges; quote from Stanley F. Turesky's paper, "Is There Still Room for the Humanities?" in New Directions for Community Colleges, vol. 3, no. 12, Winter, 1975, p. 3.

of philosophy courses and about the degree of abstract thought not encountered in their technical courses, e.g., engineering.

The serious nature of these questions raises the issue of whether justification of the philosophy curriculum is possible in this day of supermarket education. As President of Princeton University, Woodrow Wilson once presented a rationale for history and political science in regard to characteristics he believed a graduate in a leadership position should possess.[3] His approach was intuitive. In contrast, this paper presents an empirical study which aimed at identifying curricular areas and topics most valuable for instruction based on reports from persons familiar with the collegiate curricula. Since college administrators are confronted with decisions about expansion and contraction of programs and curricula, the study was designed to cite the kind of data that administrators might be looking for to determine the need for philosophy among their curricula. Particularly, it was thought that if the very same topics in the curriculum were important to students or to graduates, as well as to those who teach philosophy, then this would be one indication of the value of philosophy which administrators might want to consider.

It was further presumed that a topical approach leading to

3. Woodrow Wilson, "Princeton in the Nation's Service," Forum, XXII, December, 1896, reprinted in American Higher Education: A Documentary History, Vol. II, edited by Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith, University of Chicago (Chicago: 1961), p. 694.

the acquisition of statistical data would identify curricular areas that form the nucleus or core of a given subject matter. Agreement by most respondents about the importance of a topic could be interpreted to mean that the topic is essential to the program. By observing the courses in which these essential topics are discussed, it was anticipated that the "basic" courses of the philosophy curriculum could be determined. Inasmuch as the community college cannot provide an entire range of philosophy offerings, the "basic" courses would make a valuable introduction to the philosophy curriculum.

Procedures

Thirty-seven topics were itemized by clustering or clumping related concepts under a general concept or topic. Care was taken that the clustering be achieved without forcing particular concepts into an inappropriate mold. Topics were then grouped under topical headings or areas--knowledge, major schools, e.g., phenomenology, logic, value theory and ethics, and applications of philosophical methods, e.g., philosophy of business.

Groups to whom the questionnaire pertaining to philosophy topics was to be administered were next identified. Each group would be asked to assess the importance of a topic, but the criterion of "importance of the curriculum" had to be adjusted to the interests of the group. The philosophy faculty, whether at the university* or the community college,

*Reference to university faculty will also include four-year college faculty in this paper.

were to be asked to assess the importance of the topic to the philosophy curriculum at their level of instruction. Topics could be assessed as essential to their program, acceptable, questionnable, not to be offered, or cannot judge. Alumni of the community college or of the university were to be offered a gradient of responses pertaining to the frequency with which they thought of material classified under the topic. Both community college and university students were to judge the importance of a topic in terms of the frequency with which they studied material on the topic. These 3 groups--faculty who teach philosophy, alumni (whether or not they took courses in philosophy), and students (currently enrolled in some philosophy course)--were selected as respondents, because they were in a position to report on the importance of the topic in their life experiences.

The statistically analyzable questionnaire was mailed to 20 university philosophy professors, each from a different institution in the states of Illinois, Ohio and New York, 14 of whom responded; to 12 community college philosophy professors identified in the same way, 5 of whom responded; 50 university alumni of DePaul University or Chicago State University, 15 of whom responded; and 25 community college alumni of College of DuPage, 14 of whom responded. It was also administered to 22 college juniors in a philosophy class at DePaul University and to 19 freshmen and sophomores

in an introductory philosophy class at College of DuPage. The study was completed the Fall of 1977. University and community college faculty were selected through a random process. Alumni associations of the 3 participating institutions were asked to select active members of their associations. A self-administered profile chart checked students and alumni to assure that respondents in these groups were not chosen for any characteristic which might bias the study, e.g., extraordinary amount of training in philosophy. Overall return of those contacted was 73.5%.

Findings

Data obtained was significant to the .05 level for 33 of the 37 topical items. Only statistically significant data was analyzed. Evaluation proceeded on the basis that if 70% of a group assessed a particular topic high (giving it a "3" or "4" rating), then that topic was very important to that group. However, if 25% or less gave it a high rating, the topic was interpreted to be irrelevant, while if the topic's scores ranged between 25% and 40% in the high area, the topic was construed as un-important. A score between 40% and 70% meant that the topic was important but not very important, for that particular group.

Table 1 is a summary of the topical responses by responding groups--university professors, community college professors, university alumni, university

TABLE 1:

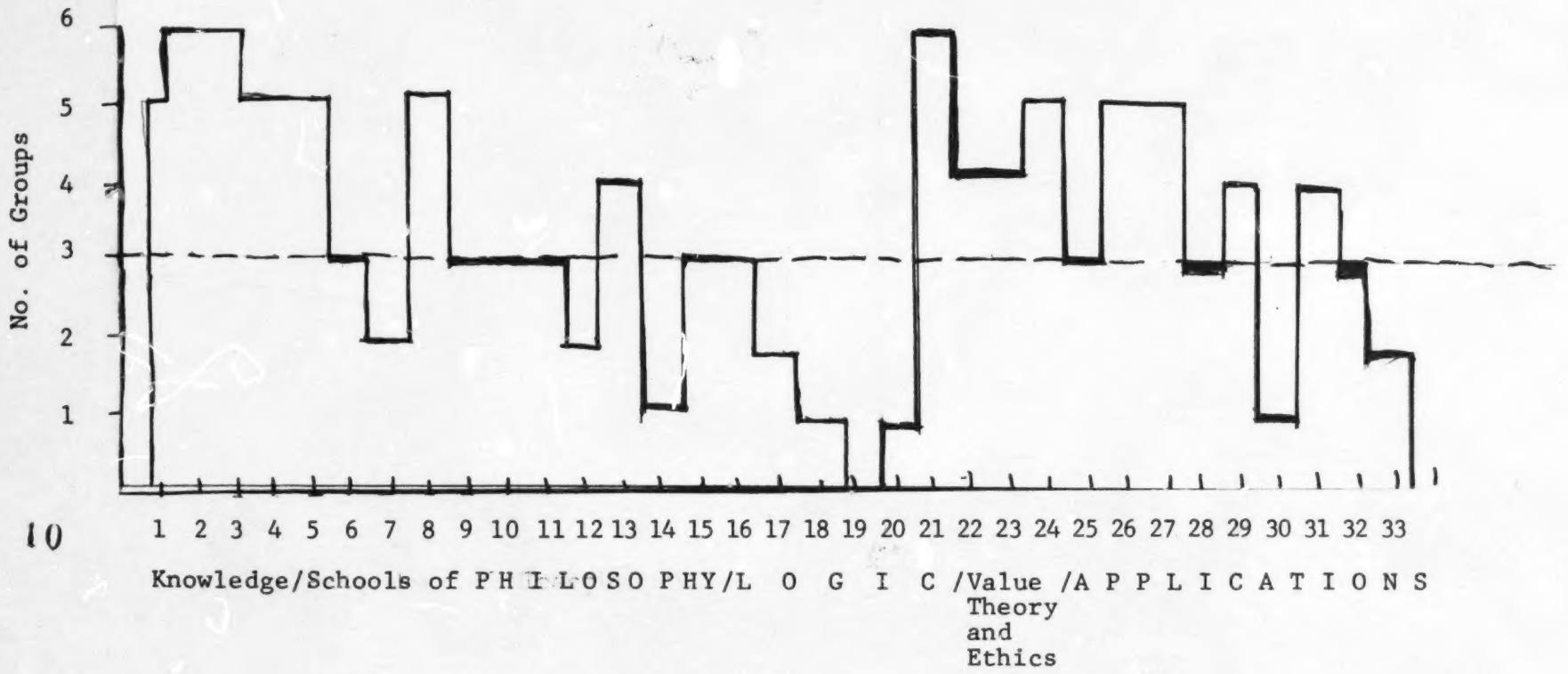
SUMMARY OF TOPICAL RESPONSES BY RESPONDING GROUP

	Very Important	Important	Unimportant	Irrelevant
University Professors	22 67%	10 30%	1 3%	0 0%
Community College Professors	10 30%	13 40%	5 15%	5 15%
University Alumni	6 18%	16 48%	8 25%	3 9%
University Students	7 21%	9 28%	7 21%	10 30%
Community College Alumni	3 9%	7 21%	13 40%	10 30%
Community College Students	3 9%	7 21%	15 45%	18 25%

percent in cell up to 1% variation
questionnaire responses significant to .05 level

topics = 33
N = 89

FIGURE 2: TOPICS OF IMPORTANCE IDENTIFIED BY AREA


No. of Groups
6
5
4
3
2
1
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33
Knowledge/Schools of PHILOSOPHY/LOGIC/Value Theory and Ethics/APPLICATIONS

students, community college alumni, and community college students. It suggests a correlation between the amount of training in philosophy and believing philosophy to be important. The more training a person has in philosophy or exposure to its curriculum, the more likely he is to regard the material as important. On the one hand, university professors thought 22 topics very important but community college alumni and students ranked only 3 such items as very important. Figure 1 graphically portrays each group's sense of philosophy's importance for them. Philosophy seems to be meaningful for university connected persons, but appears of little consequence to community college persons, except for the instructors at the community college. University alumni approach community college professors in the number of topics they thought important--24 of 33, as compared to 25 for community college professors. Community college students and alumni found only 10 topics important, less than half the number for university alumni, and about two-thirds the number for university students.

Figure 2 presents a summary of the topical headings or areas in the questionnaire respondents identified as important. Using the concurrence of 3 groups as a norm, the areas of knowledge, value theory and ethics are above the norm; but only two topics in schools of philosophy, Plato and existentialism, and only 1 topic in the area of

logic, inductive reasoning, rise above the norm. In applications, 2 topics, philosophy of religion and religious philosophy, are far above the norm, while philosophy of law and philosophy of business are also above the norm. Inasmuch as these topics or topical areas are important to 4 of the 6 responding groups, one has evidence for thinking that they consitute a core of material important to a basic philosophy curriculum.

Other findings were:

(1) University professors and community college professors judged more topics important than any other group.

(2) University students identified as important topics the ones selected by university alumni, but did not chose as many, the ratio being 14 to 22.

(3) Overall, topics deemed irrelevant by respondents were in the topical areas of major schools in philosophy, and logic (with the important exception of inductive reasoning). Of the 17 topics that at least one group considered irrelevant, 11 were judged irrelevant by at least one other group (82%) and 4 by two other groups (24%). The latter four topics were analytic philosophy, quantification logic, extended logics, and applications of logic to science.

The findings support two general theses about the value of philosophy. First, philosophy can be important for evaluating

knowledge claims, arguing positions, formulating hypotheses, and making analogies, which was important for most respondents. Our study shows that students and alumni find these topics of particular value in their everyday life. Second, the kind of intellectual atmosphere that is maintained by the university system tends to nurture the study of philosophy. Community college students reported very little utilization of other topics in philosophy, nor do community college alumni seem to make much use of philosophical materials. The flat profile of both community college students and alumni may be accounted for with respect to an orientation that ignores the intellectual dimension of the college experience.

Questions about instructional design

The questionnaire contained additional items concerning the teaching of philosophy. Several questions elicited responses on how philosophy should be taught in college. Below is a summary of what particular groups thought about the way philosophy should be taught.

(1) Faculty overwhelmingly believed that adult students learn as well as younger students.

(2) 75% of all the professors and students believed that a major in philosophy need not be thinking about teaching philosophy.

(3) 64% of all the professors agreed that philosophy can be taught by someone other than a philosophy professor, e.g., a mathematician.

(4) 76% of all the professors and students thought philosophy should be taught in the high schools.

(5) 75% of the students were willing to be taught philosophy by a professor whose primary expertise is in another subject matter.

(6) 89% of all the professors thought anyone who teaches philosophy should have at least 9 graduate semester hours in philosophy.

(7) 75% of the students wanted a professor who teaches philosophy to have had graduate training in the field.

In sum, both faculty and students concur that the person who teaches philosophy should have had graduate training in philosophy of at least 9 semester hours, or in some instances, special expertise as compensation for lack of this amount.

Summary of the study

By making certain assumptions, the philosophy curriculum was analyzed into topics which the philosophy faculty, alumni from institutions of higher learning, and college students could assess. It was found that epistemological topics, those in ethics and value theory, inductive reasoning, and philosophy of religion appear to have special significance to these responding groups and can be used to identify basic courses in the philosophy curriculum. On the other hand, the area of logic and topics in schools of philosophy and in applications of philosophical methods are of little importance to many responding groups.

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